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Leaks

AS RECEIVED

THE ADMINISTRATION is trying to plug news "leaks." It's happened before. Almost every administration, at one time or another, has become worried about its members' becoming "leakers" and has tried to curb their tongues.

Each time the subject comes up, the news media protest that the First Amendment is being threatened and the public's "right to know" is being abridged.

Well, in our experience, such exercises rarely do serious damage to the freedom of the press. Nor do they have the effect intended.

Understand that we are not talking about leaks of legitimately classified information. We have no quarrel with the government's efforts to withhold information that must be protected in the interest of national security. We do not deal in secret documents and we have little sympathy for reporters who are thwarted in their efforts to obtain them.

That said, however, we will protest as strongly as do our colleagues in the other media over efforts to classify material just because its publication might be embarrassing to the government or cast it in an unfavorable light.

Our political system requires that the government operate in the public view. Public officials, particularly some in the military departments, often wish that were not the case. It would be much easier to operate on a "need-to-know" basis, with the government deciding who needs to know what. But that doesn't happen to be the rule here.

Nor do officials really want to stop all the leaks. What they want is to block the flow of information that they would rather not have publicized.

Every Washington reporter worth his or her salt is fed information that the government departments want out, but for various reasons, don't want to put out in official news releases. At times, cabinet members and even presidents have engineered such leaks, and reporters are kidding themselves if they think that they have dug out all the little gems by hard work and craftiness.

Many officials, including some in the Pentagon, welcome efforts to control the news flow. They will use the administration orders to limit media access to legitimate contacts. That usually is a mistake.

For one thing, it damages a department's credibility. A reporter who is cut off from the prime sources of information, quite naturally is suspicious of what is put out in the official "handouts." Many a news release favorable to the government has been turned into an indictment just because the addition of the phrase "officials refused to elaborate . . ."

For another thing, there is no such thing as plugging all the leaks. When responsible officials are forbidden to talk to the press, someone else always will. That someone may be the least-informed, most-disgruntled employee in the department. Such people often have a compulsion to tell everything they know and a little more. If they are the only sources available, the news will be skewed far more than it would have been had knowledgeable people been allowed to respond honestly.

And finally, the problem with trying to plug leaks is that it tends to make burrowing moles of otherwise mild-mannered reporters. There is something in the nature of the newshound that makes him want to dig — not where the ground is soft and yielding but where it is hard and resistant. If he can't get the story, the resistance becomes the story. The unresponsiveness of the government can be a more damaging revelation than the story itself.